

## Olympia

The sensuality of children is integral to parental fondness. The bond between mother and child is physical; and most of the psychological responses and affections are expressed in a physical way.

In art, however, there are well-grounded taboos against recognizing this essential economy. Centuries of jealous puritanical mores-akin to the suppression of all aspects of childhood-have discouraged the artistic exploration of the sensual delight of children and the enjoyment of their own bodies. Undoubtedly a part of this taboo was the fear of the child's latent sexuality and its potential for exciting inappropriate and sinful desire. Probably, too, this anxiety was the cause of Lewis Carroll destroying quantities of his photographs of the child Alice Liddell. Carroll may have feared that either the works were-or would be construed as-paedophilic.

In the postwar period of the twentieth century (in which the recognition of child psychology improved and general sexual attitudes were liberalized), fears concerning the free expression of the sensuality of children were compounded by enlightened scruples, legitimate paranoia for the exploitation of children as sex objects.

Yet children know nothing of this and, in spite of parental discouragement, enjoy displaying themselves with theatrical self-consciousness, a sophisticated language of sensual appeal and seductive gestures. For Freud, of course, the child is bristling with sexual impulse, even from babyhood. You could argue that children learn the language of sexual address and narcissism from adults; but no one really knows how deep or superficial their eroticism is. The only source of evidence is children themselves, whose motives in the manifestation of sensual attitude remain inscrutable.

Polixeni Papapetrou's Play is a suite of photographs taken at the instigation of her two-year old daughter, Olympia. "Mummy, come and photo me", she would exhort. Frequently this would be a ritual which mother had to perform before an invited adult was scheduled to sit for a portrait. Olympia's determination to be photographed-and her subsequent satisfaction on seeing the results-set in train a spontaneous exploration of childhood sensuality and a bracing confrontation of the attendant embarrassments.

In the suite of nude photographs, Olympia is seen with a dummy or pacifier. It is a necessary token of her age; otherwise, the spectator could assume that the model is a pre-pubescent Balthusian nymphet. Yet the dummy, itself, is ambiguous; for while it vouches for the child's infancy (and by implication non-genital sexuality or confinement to an oral phase) it also evokes the perversity of pleasure-sucking, i.e. a sucking for non-nutritious purposes, apparently serving a hedonistic function unrelated to nourishment. Tellingly, then, the outward sign of innocence is

potentially the most diabolically sexual.

The works challenge the taboos against the recognition of child sensuality; but they are not a form of erotica. The photographs are stylistically chaste and unromanticized. They document the display in its communicative integrity and invite the instantaneous rush of fondness for the adult-like poses in a tiny child. In the process, however, they do acknowledge that the child has access rights to an erotic language. If the photographs were conceived as erotica, this language would be stylistically induced by the photographer and imposed upon the model. The confronting aspect of this suite is that the sensual language proceeds from the child alone.

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